X use Slave at Arrowsmith baby
Female Moses of the Peace (Rod A. Carroch)

TWO PEACE RIVER YARNS

Already published

It is sometimes necessary to separate hearsay from fact, yet the curious intermingling of fact and imagination often results in the creation of a good yarn. When I run across a good story that is truly regional in subject, and that some folks at least like to tell because it seems to interpret the countryside; I don't worry too much about whether or not it's all actual fact. Folktales grow up through the transposing of fact into fiction and of fiction into fact. I would even go so far as to say that the best tales have somewhere an actual basis, or beginning in fact. Take, for instance, the very famous western tale of the rawhide harness, or traces. It's a well known fact that rawhide will stretch unbelievably when it gets wet; and it's also a well known fact that in many pioneer areas it was necessary to use rawhide for harness. Here, of course, is a fact basis for the famous tall story. A pioneer who has been a harness maker comes to settle in Alberta. One of the first things he does is to make himself a fine set of rawhide harness. One day he is driving home from town when a terrific rain storm comes up. The mud gets deep, the harness gets wet and the rawhide traces begin to stretch and stretch. So when the pioneer and his team arrive at home the wagon is still two miles down the road. In disgust the pioneer unharnesses his team and throws the harness over the hitching post. That night a warm, dry wind comes up, and when the pioneer goes out the next morning, there is his wagon sitting in the yard. Rawhide contracts as much as it stretches. Therefore, if a good story isn't actually history, ~~perhaps~~ it deserves to be history.

It's that way with a very strange tale I collected up in the Peace River Country . . . a tale which I've called Fate's Uncertain Fortune. I am sure it is one of the slyest tricks fate ever played, and, in some way, is worthy of being the theme of a great tragedy . . . in the Greek classical tradition. The story has been put into writing once . . . in a curious little book called "A Hatchet Mark in Duplicate". It was written by one of the pioneer Anglician missionaries to the North, the Reverend Alfred Garrioch, who sojourned at Fort Vermillion, Dunvegan, and other Peace River spots.

The tale has also been told me by individuals now living in the Peace River Country, who say, for a fact, that the story is true. When I asked them who told them, they were vague about sources . . . hearsay, again . . . But anyway, here's the yarn:

This strange story begins

~~It all apparently~~ began with an Englishman named Armson who panned gold in 1871 at Fort St. John in company with Nigger Dan Williams, Banjo Mike, and Twelve Foot Davis. As Fall drew near, Armson was heard to say that he intended going south of the Peace

River to trap. This he apparently did, taking with him his beautiful Blackfoot wife.

The wife, so the account goes, had but one physical imperfection. She had been chopping wood one day and had struck the second toe on her left foot, leaving a scar which extended from the toenail in the form of a ridge.

The Armsons left Fort St. John in a dugout canoe, and Armson stated that in the spring they would return to the Saskatchewan, via Lesser Slave Lake and the Athabaska River. Insteaad of reappearing, however, the Armsons vanished and were not heard from again.

Less than a year later a Blackfoot Indian named Jean was paddling up the Peace in his dugout looking for beaver. Suddenly he saw a small raft floating down toward him, and to a stick on the raft was fastened a reg flag. Jean paddled rapidly out and to his profound surprise, discovered a very young baby girl on the raft. He lost no time getting the child to shore, and found that she was in the last stages of starvation. He hurriedly boiled a duck that he had recently shot, made some soup, and fed the baby a few drops. Fortunately, a camp of Beaver Indians was close by, and Jean carried the baby to an Indian mother who nursed the child.

When they were examining the baby, the Indians discovered a curious mark on the second toe of the left foot . . . a mark which one of the Indian women ~~said~~ maintained was "older than the child!"

Jean left the child with the Beaver Indians, who soon broke camp, taking the baby with them. That was the last to be heard of this female Moses of the Peace for a long time.

Several years later the Reverend Garrioch chanched upon a couple from St. Paul, Minnesota, named Vinning. The couple had with them an extremely attractive young girl. The Vinnings confided to Garrioch that the child was not their own, but that she had been turned over to them by a free trader at Edmonton who said he got the child from some Indian up in the Peace River Country. The Vinnings had adopted the child and were raising her as their own.

It happened that not long after parting from the Vinnings, Garrioch encountered the Indian named Jean. In the course of their travels together, Jean told the missionary about finding the baby girl, a white child, on the raft. Garrioch immediately began to suspect that the Vinnings' adopted daughter and the raft- baby were one and the same. He set out to discover where the child had come from.

He enlisted the help of a trapper named Sizerman, who eventually discovered the remains of an old trap-line somewhere south of the Peace River. He followed the marks of the old line until he came to the remains of a cabin, across which a large tree had fallen. Digging in under the tree he discovered two skeletons. One was lying on a bed. The other was on the floor beside the bed. Hanging on a projection of the cabin wall was a small notebook done up in a piece of skin. On the floor were remains of a child's rattle, parts of a moss-bag, and a shattered gun. There was, however, no child's skeleton present.

Sizerman carried the notebook to Garrioch, and after reading through it they reconstructed what had probably happened in the cabin. The Armsons had put up a comfortable cabin in the autumn of 1871 and had spent a profitable winter trapping, for Sizerman

found the mouldering skins of many marten and beaver. Probably sometime in March a child had been born to Mrs. Armson, and soon afterwards Armson had had an accident with his gun, and infection had set in. He became more and more weak, and finally so weak that he could not provide food. The woman was unable to provide, and father, mother, and child were slowly starving to death. When it became apparent that Armson would not recover, Mrs. Armson staggered down to the banks of the river, made a simple raft, placed the child on it, and pushed it out into the current. She then returned to the cabin to die with her husband.

One item from Armson's diary explained the mark on the child's toe: "Born this day (March 31) a girl, perfectly formed and with vocal organs in fine working condition. ~~It would seem that~~ When Mrs. Armson's glancing hatchet hit her toe at the mining camp at Fort St. John, she inflicted a hatchet mark in duplicate, for on the corresponding toe of her little daughter's foot there is the perfect replica of the scar of hers."

Another item in the diary stated: "May 15, 1872, I am dying . . . effects of accident. My first wife died in England, ~~leaving~~ left a son, now five. Write to legal firm Blake and Barstow, London, England. Wife and babe weak from starvation. The Lord will provide."

Garrioch turned the mento of the tragedy over to the couple who had adopted the child . . . by this time a girl of eighteen. They called her Lily, and she was soon to be married to a handsome young man named Herbert Melvin, fresh over from England. The foster parents immediately cabled the legal firm, stating the facts, and asking for the name and address of the son Mr. Armson mentioned

in his diary. The reply they received was shocking to all concerned. The firm wired back that the son's name was Herbert Melvin, and it was actually established that Melvin was Lily's half-brother!

As Mr. Garrioch says in his book: "All this was, of course, extremely sad and disappointing, but when you come to think of it, was it not a blessed slip between the cup and the lip", as it saved our young friends from an awful tragedy."

I am glad to be able to report, too, that a year later Lily was married to a young man named Gerald Clive, and that her half-brother, Herbert Melvin, appeared in Calgary bringing with him a charming English wife!

Speaking of hearsay, while I was collecting yarns in southern Alberta, I encountered many tales about an American Negro named, or nicknamed, "Nigger Dan". In the south Dan was a noted pistol and rifle shot.

He achieved his initial reputation for superb marksmanship in the following manner: He aroused the emnity of a young Blackfoot brave named Lightening Streak. As usual, only a woman can call up these primeval instincts in the male, and a challange to mortal combat was accepted by Nigger Dan. The agreement was: Winchesters at 80 yards. The Indian and Nigger Dan were to stand back to back, 80 yards apart, and on a signal...one...two...three.... were to turn, begin shooting, and walk toward each other until one or the other fell, or until the guns were emptied.

Dan felled his man at the first shot, losing, however, the lobe of one ear by the Indian's bullet. Another young brave offered to take his tribesman's place, and after the pliminaries were all settled the fatal words again rang out: One...two....three..... Again Dan whirled and felled his man, and this time the crown of his stetson was punctured by the Indian's bullet. This second duel seemed to settle the affair: in Dan's favor.

In the Peace River Country I encountered Dan again. Dan, so hearsay goes, had in the Peace River Country run afoul of the interests of one of the big trading companies, and refusing to be daunted, had declared in writing on a tree that he would not be trodden underfoot by any man save her gracious majesty, Queen Victoria. It seems strange, therefore, that Dan should have been brought to trial in Edmonton in the name of Her Majesty, charged with having aimed at, and discharged a gun at the person of one, James McKinlay, employee of the trading company.

Knowing as I did, that hearsay said Dan was a dead shot, I was puzzled at McKinlay's escape. The trial, however, was a complete vindication of Dan's markmanship.

McKinlay charged that Dan said to him one day, "I'll fix you!" and without any further conversation entered his cabin and

reappeared with his rifle which he presented muzzle-first at McKinlay and pulled the trigger. According to McKinlay the bullet whistled close to his ear.

Dan was defended by a ~~character~~ wandering lawyer named Banjo Mike who happened to be in Edmonton and who, like Dan, had little use for the trading company which employed McKinlay.

During the trial, Banjo Mike asked McKinlay a few pertinent questions.

"Could you hear Nigger Dan distinctly?" Mr. McKinlay.

"Yes, I could."

"You know for certain that the words, 'I'll fix you', were addressed to you?"

"Yes," replied McKinlay.

"Were you standing in front of the house or at the side of it?"

"In front of it."

"Did the bullet strike the house?"

"I don't know."

Banjo Mike then addressed the jury. He pointed out that the words, "I'll fix you", might have meant most anything. As he suggested, perhaps Dan had been having trouble with his gun, and that the words were addressed to the gun. Who knows? He also pointed out that McKinlay had said the bullet whistled close to his ear. "Gentlemen, anybody who knows anything about bullets will tell you that it's impossible to know from the sound whether a bullet is a foot, or a yard, or ten feet, or ten yards away. Also the plaintiff admits that he was standing in front of his house, yet he doesn't know whether the house was hit. I leave

you

you to decide this point, gentlemen. But this much I do know, as do so many others, that Nigger Dan, at a distance of one hundred yards can take the eye out of a jackrabbit at every pop. Gentlemen, had Dan had the slightest intention of harming Mr. McKinlay, he would not be here today to amuse you with his little story!"

So, through his noted reputation as a marksman, and through the help of a clever frontier lawyer, Nigger Dan was completely absolved of any guilt in the affair.

Heresay also tells me that Nigger Dan was the most famous strong man ever to be known in the Peace River Country. That he was so strong, that when his ox-drawn wagon got stuck in the mud, Dan would merely take the ox away and draw the wagon free himself.

And Dan, again according to hearsay, was once passing near a group of seven men who were vainly attempting to raise a large flagpole in front of the Hudson's Bay post at Dunvegan. Dan watched them struggle for a little while, then calmly motioning the seven menaside, he took hold of the pole and alone raised it to an upright position.

Some man! And a worthy subject for folklore.

A wonderful thing, hearsay.